

for the

Indian American Community

By LISETTE B. POOLE

Affluent and confident, the Indian American community in the San Francisco Bay Area is coming of age. From computer industry entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, physicians in major hospitals, and professors in colleges and universities, to owners of grocery stores and community newspapers, they are working to leave a tangible legacy.

Meanwhile, their children are blazing new trails as magazine publishers, filmmakers, singers and clothing designers, expressing the vibrant mix of their Indian heritage and American experience in songs, movies, stories and fashion shows.

The northern California community, more than 200,000 strong and said to be the largest in North America, will soon break ground for a new multimillion dollar, 3,700-square-meter India Community Center—double the size of the present one, which itself is the largest Indian

American community center in North America, says center Chairwoman Talat Hasan. This is a testimony not only to the affluence of its members but a response to the needs of an expanding population that wants to share and preserve its cultural heritage, social and spiritual values.

The center, estimated to cost upwards of \$15 million, will be located next to the existing center, in Milpitas, in one of the eight Bay Area counties. It will be furnished with the first free, inter-community, walk-in medical clinic staffed by volunteer doctors and nurses.

Signs of integration and social influence are evident on the local and state levels. This recognition brings pride to many of the older generation who put down roots here in the early 1960s and struggled to study, work, become accepted and forge an identity for themselves in this region.

Many say they chose to settle here to draw strength from a well established community of Sikhs who had ventured to California in the early 1900s and settled in Yuba City, some

250 kilometers north of the Bay Area. While that group set roots as farmers in a small countryside community, newer immigrants were involved in medicine, technology and business in more metropolitan areas.

“Being Indian is cool now,” says magazine publisher Deepak Srivastava. “The generation of 25- to 40-year-olds has established family roots, is well-grounded in education with at least master’s degrees in their professions, good jobs and lots of disposable income. They don’t have survival

*Right: Designer Swati Kapoor helps a client try on a custom-made evening coat.
Left: Yoga master Mahendra Lohmoor has a loyal following of yoga students from around the Bay Area.*



Courtesy India Community Center

The new generation of Indian Americans wants to share its heritage in



Courtesy cohfrankphotography.com

business, social and cultural endeavors.

issues. They are a long way from where their parents started.”

Srivastava recognized these signs early on and understood that this group, as comfortable in silk saris as in hip-hugging jeans, needed to identify with a medium they could call their own. Compelled by this vision, he sold his home in order to raise money for the birth of *Nirvana*. In two years it has become a glossy, quarterly magazine catering to a well-heeled clientele. The blend of stories, travel and health advice, fashion tips and personal testimonies target a holistic image aimed at young Indian professionals but also appealing to their peers in other Asian minorities.

“The 30-something women of my generation actually have the best of two worlds,” exclaims Farah Ahmed in a telephone interview from her office in New York City. “We travel on business or pleasure anywhere in North America, Europe and Asia. Our perspective is global. Community and family matter to us. We appreciate and promote our heritage and culture while at the same time we value our achievements and personal independence.” The magazine reflects those tastes.

With a bachelor’s degree in physiology and a law degree from the University of Virginia, Ahmed is the executive editor and attorney handling print and Internet advertising for *Nirvana*

Jayashree Patil, president and CEO of Nirvana Media Group. “We want to promote not only the fun things in life—travel, vacation and such—but also address the brains, educate and encourage philanthropy. These are values that bring inner beauty and peace. They help connect the two worlds in which we live.”

The ability to straddle both worlds is an asset many in the community reflect in fields including media, music, entertainment, fashion design, education and health.

Some, who were once California teenagers, have even become household names: For example, Raj Mathai, sports director for NBC11, anchors the nightly TV sports broadcasts; M. Night Shyamalan just released his latest movie *Lady in the Water*; Anoushka Shankar, daughter of sitar maestro Ravi Shankar,

Below, left: Charu Prakash shares food decorating tips with her sons, Atil (left) and Rohan. Below: Nirvana Woman Publisher Deepak Srivastava (left), Salma Haque, managing and beauty editor, and Jayashree Patil, president and CEO of Nirvana Media Group with their latest issue. Right: Anoushka Shankar, sitarist, pianist and composer of Indian classical music, has popularized it at sold-out performances in the United States.



Woman. She splits her time between New York and California.

The magazine is headquartered in Mountain View in the heart of Silicon Valley near the offices of Indian-born Sabeer Bhatia who spearheaded Hotmail. So almost by default the editors of *Nirvana Woman* use cutting-edge technology for photography and graphics layouts as they assemble the magazine by e-mail, online folders, fax and voice conferences with contributors from all over the United States and abroad. Editors say it has a circulation of 40,000. Its online version is preparing to launch a Ms. Nirvana contest, allowing readers to nominate and vote for supermodel candidates.

“This will take us to the next level, a global level,” says

graduated from high school in the southern California beach town of Encinitas and is a U.S. permanent resident, according to the Ravi Shankar Foundation. She released her fourth solo album *Rise* last year.

Trivandrum-born Mathai has twice won an Emmy, America’s premier television award. He hosts the top rated “Sports Sunday” program that attracts high profile sports figures. He shows up at community events and his infectious grin and impeccable attire endear him to many local charities and businesses. He is invited to be master of ceremonies at galas and fundraising banquets.

Another familiar face in the mainstream media is Dr. Sanjay

“I feel almost as much at home here in Fremont and the Bay

Gupta, CNN's senior medical correspondent. He is an assistant professor at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia and is chief of neurosurgery at the University Hospital and Grady Memorial Hospital. He also hosts the half-hour weekend show "House Call with Dr. Sanjay Gupta." Last year, he reported on medical-related stories in Iraq and hot spots in the United States following Hurricane Katrina. Some in the community credit Gupta for drawing many South Asians into medicine and journalism.

"Music, like most forms of art, brings some sort of cohesion for the South Asian community in North America," singer Kiran Ahluwalia says. "I lump together Canada and America because in both countries the communities are just coming of age and for the first time you have millionaires who are South Asian," she said in a National Public Radio interview. "Their parents were born in Pakistan, Bangladesh or India but they were born here. So we need definition for ourselves; we are hybrids. There are two cultures in us; trying to balance the two cultures in us is the larger thing."

Ahluwalia left India as a girl. She was a successful bond trader in Canada but came home one day, saying her MBA and her job were just not rewarding enough. She enjoyed music more. In her recently released, self-titled CD, Ahluwalia celebrates the emotional, slow, melancholic ghazals. She sings contemporary songs with traditional lyrics that are very popular in South Asia.

On a parallel track, Anoushka Shankar, a sitarist, pianist, conductor and composer, is passionate about Indian classical music and admits she is on a mission to show that it can be as fashionable as Bollywood pop. In May 2005, before she released *Rise*, she and her father played a sold-out performance at the San Francisco Opera House.

"I've been trying to tap into a younger culture," she was quoted as saying in a *Time* magazine Asia edition. "My father did that for many decades, but people closer to my own age [23] don't necessarily know as much about music as his young fans did."

The desire to share and expand values led Swati Kapoor, a native of Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, to fuse Indian fashion into a cross-cultural couture.

"Every garment has an Indian signature—Mogul motif, embroidery, beads, sequins—a threadwork that brings a sparkle to life," she says as she spreads an ornate black-on-silver georgette evening dress, and moves on to show a collection of soft, glittering, silk saris, embroidered tunics and pants, beaded corsets and skirts, matching scarves, earrings and bracelets.

Her clientele is varied: Americans, Middle Easterners, South Asians from India and Pakistan, young debutantes, established political figures like Liz Figueroa (former Democratic state senator from Fremont) and San Francisco socialites. Kapoor explains that she consults with a client, offers a broad picture design, works



Courtesy Nirvana Woman

with garment industry designers in New Delhi and Mumbai and *voilà!* each dress is unique and à la mode.

"Our lives are global. Fashion too is global. I just try to adapt the garment to the personality and need of the client. The right dress helps my clients stand out, stand strong," she says with enthusiasm. "It is a personal touch."

Three years ago when the dotcom industry went bust, Kapoor says her master's degree in graphic design, passion for art and the attraction of the mainstream population to the cultures of the growing ethnic immigrant communities converged. "I decided I would be my own boss. I worked 20 hours out of 24 preparing a line of clothes." She now has a thriving business. Her fashion shows are packed. Her husband is her greatest fan, she says as she cuddles their six-month-old son, Shan.

According to the U.S. Census 2000, Asians make up 11 percent of California's population. But in the nine Bay Area counties, Asians make up 19 percent, about 40,000 shy of the Bay Area's Latino community. Including people who are part Asian, the group constitutes 12.3 percent of the population statewide and 21 percent of the Bay Area.

"I feel almost as much at home here in Fremont and the Bay Area as I would in India," says Charu Prakash. "We have come a long way from when we first arrived in the area." She brings the flavor of India to the table and teaches others, including her sons, to experience it.

Prakash's cooking classes, through the India Community Center in Milpitas, fill up quickly. She invites students to taste

Area as I would in India. We have come a long way from when we first arrived."

—CHARU PRAKASH



Courtesy India Community Center

At the India Community Center in Milpitas, California, members perform Indian classical dance with an American pop spin.

different foods, from Hawaii, China, Italy, Lebanon, Egypt and offers dishes from various regions of India and Pakistan.

“Diwali is the peak of the gourmet season,” she says. Prakash likes to underline tradition at special gatherings of friends and family with playful center table decorations—like hollowed squash boats for chutney and edible flowers made of radish faces. Her desserts include *gulab jamuns*, *burfis* made of coconut, dates, carrots and figs, and *rasmalai*.

Her most popular dishes are chicken tikka masala, fusion dishes of paneer and vegetables, samosa roll-ups, desi-style artichoke dip and petite tortilla warm-ups. She included these in a 2005 Calendar of Indian Cuisine.

“We are witnessing a thirst to pass down and share knowledge. We have an obligation to leave something very tangible that is not just money,” says Hasan of the India Community Center. “Generations of kids now and those who will follow them would not be well-served if we do not leave a legacy of culture, traditions and values, and give back to the larger American community around us.”

Today some 2,500 regular members form the core of the center in a 1,850-square-meter facility in Milpitas and a smaller satellite center in neighboring Sunnyvale. It provides social, cultural, recreational and community programs that unite the Indian community, and raises awareness about their culture in the local community. Patrons include Caucasians, Mexicans and Chinese from the neighborhood.

Seniors, children and teens are engaged in the events. Yoga and the karaoke-Friday club are popular. On special occasions—like Tamil Day, Diwali and other festivals—there are as many as 6,000 visitors a week, according to organizers. The center is supported through membership fees (\$50 per family) and donations from businesses and the government.

To end the year 2005, the community celebrated its second Annual Banquet and raised approximately \$300,000 for children and seniors programs. The gala was also the debut of the “Jollywood Dancers,” a troupe of senior citizens who received a standing ovation from some 680 guests attending the dinner. In elegant jewelry and Bengal blue and gold *lehengas* they swayed to the notes of traditional music laced with American pop.

“Jaws dropped in amazement as we watched our seniors, who had been complaining of stiff limbs, get up there and dance for us. They were an instant hit,” says Tanuja Bahal, director of marketing and membership services.

The center is the brainchild of the Godhwani brothers, Anil and Gautam, first generation Americans and successful entrepreneurs in the computer industry. It opened its doors in July 2003 to promote Indian culture and values.

The center of tomorrow will provide even more services. It will offer a 1,000-square-meter workout facility, an auditorium for concerts and shows, a library, media center, conference halls and classrooms. Organizers plan to offer a comprehensive cultural program for kids and teens—language, dancing, singing, art and history classes—and a forum where seniors can enjoy coming together for yoga, reading groups and classical dances. Catering for weddings and banquets will also be offered. Services for children will be expanded to include fully-licensed pre-school and after-school programs. Plans are underway to offer transportation to the Milpitas site for stay-at-home seniors. Additional satellite facilities are in the works. □

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